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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a home-based early childhood program in operation in the Memphis city school system and presents a rationale for early education and for parent involvement. The program involves educationally deprived 3- and 4-year-olds in eight preschool centers located in Title I schools. A parent or significant caretaker of each child enrolled in the program must be able to participate by coming to the center with the child at least twice a month and by following through with learning activities brought to the home by a home visitor. Each center is staffed with a lead teacher and four paraprofessional home visitors. Each home visitor enrolls and serves from 15 to 18 children, visiting each family once a week (for a 45-minute session) and bringing her group to the center once a week (for approximately four hours). The lead teacher is responsible for center administration, supervision of home visitors and conducting the center's classroom activities. Needs of each child are determined through administration of a locally developed diagnostic instrument, with activities designed to fit these needs. Two guidance counselors are assigned to the program, as well as a research specialist with responsibility for program evaluation. Measurement of program results confirms the need for an early childhood program. (Author/BF)

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COME ON, PARENTS, PARTICIPATE

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COME ON, PARENTS, PARTICIPATE!

In recent years great emphasis has been placed on the importance of providing quality early learning experiences to stimulate the young child's intellectual potential. It has been generally recognized that to get the child at kindergarten age, or five, is already too late. Yet it is also imperative not to usurp the parent's role and responsibility in the growth and development of the very young child. To help insure the strength and stability of the family, schools must support and assist parents in their role as educators, especially during the early years.

Urie Bronfenbrenner ("Is Early Intervention Effective?" Teachers College Record, December, 1974) has pointed out that if the gains of an early childhood educational program are to be successful initially and sustained over a period of time, parents must be directly involved in the language and cognitive development of their children. Research of early intervention programs demonstrates that gains are maintained only as long as the program lasts if only the child is involved. When parents are involved as participators, the child maintains his gain and continues to benefit long after the early education program. In addition, there is a "percolator" effect, as the parent practices learned skills on other children in the family, both younger and older.

Other conclusions of the Bronfenbrenner review, pointed out by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Parent Education Demonstration Project are: (a) gains made by children in home-based programs hold up for three to four years after the program terminates (presumably because the parent is around long after the project), (b) the most critical element in early education programs is the direct involvement of a mother or a mother figure in the developmental activities of the child, (c) the earlier the involvement of interested parents and their children, the more effective the program is for the children, and (d) children continue to benefit from parent involvement through grade six.

Memphis City Schools began a pilot Home-Based Early Childhood Program in the fall of 1974. Initially there were four "Centers", one in each of the system's decentralized areas. The next year a new Center in each area brought the total to the current eight. The schools chosen to house the Centers are all Title I schools, which means they are high on the poverty level index. The incidence of poverty in the schools ranges from 56% to 95%, based on the number of families qualifying for free lunch.

Each Center is staffed with a Lead Teacher and four Home Visitors. The Lead Teachers have special Early Childhood training. The four Home Visitors are para-professionals. A college degree is not required, but a large percentage of the thirty-two Home Visitors do have some college training. Intensive in-service training is planned and conducted by the Project Director and the Resource Specialist, whose responsibility it is to administer the program. Two Guidance Counselors are assigned to the program, and a Research Specialist from the Division of Research and Planning evaluates the project.

The target population for the program is educationally deprived three and four year olds who reside within the Center area. A parent or significant care-taker of the child must be willing to participate in the program by coming to the Center with the child at least twice a month and by following through with learning activities left in the home by the Home Visitor.

Each Home Visitor enrolls and serves fifteen to eighteen children. She visits each family once a week for a forty-five minute session. During the visit she models appropriate teaching activities for the parent, and seeks to involve the parent in meaningful activities with the child.

The Lead Teacher is responsible for administering her Center, over-seeing the activities of the four Home Visitors, and leading classroom activities for the children four days a week. Each Home Visitor brings her group of children and parents into the Center for approximately four hours, one day a week. The school system's buses are utilized to pick up the children and parents and bring them to the Center and return them home in the afternoon. Table 1 gives an outline of the Center schedule.

Table 1
Center Schedule

Home Visitors	A	B	C	D
Monday	Center Day	Home Visits	Home Visits	Home Visits
Tuesday	Home Visits	Center Day	Home Visits	Home Visits
Wednesday	Home Visits	Home Visits	Center Day	Home Visits
Thursday	Home Visits	Home Visits	Home Visits	Center Day
Friday	P L A N N I N G	A N D	S T A F F	D E V E L O P M E N T

The above schedule is followed the first three weeks of each month. During the fourth week, no class-room sessions are held, so that the Lead Teacher may make home visits with each Home Visitor.

The parents who come to the classroom session are actively involved with the children in large group sessions, small groups, and individually on a one-to-one basis. They observe the Lead Teacher and Home Visitor model appropriate teaching behavior; they learn songs and finger-plays; they talk individually with children; they observe other children at play; they create learning games to take home; and they enjoy social interaction with other parents.

The program is based on the belief that the child's growth and development happens when he is engaged in actions with other people that bind the child and the others in mutually fulfilling ways. Such actions entail the child's self-regulation, his initiative in dealing with others, and a reciprocity of self-regulation and initiative on the part of others. Such actions take place for the child under conditions of playfulness and pleasure. The mutual construction of actions that bind adult and child in real, concrete and satisfying forms, rather than training imposed upon the child to implant the proper ways of living, is the caretaking process most associated with productive growth.

With normal growth and development, the child is increasingly open to and interested in novelty in his world. He explores further and further; creates more complex encounters; develops cognitive and language capacities which enable him to discover and regulate himself more intricately and to discover and handle the world in new and unique ways.

From birth onward, parents have the most frequent and sustaining contact with the child and are responsible for teaching the child important skills and attitudes. Parents' ability to understand how their child grows and learns and their skills as the child's primary teachers will have a long-term impact on the child.

The program's primary goal is to help the parent develop the skills she needs to support and teach her child more effectively.

The needs of each child enrolled in the program are determined by the administration of a locally designed diagnostic instrument, Home-Based Early Learning Program or HELP. The instrument assesses the child in five developmental areas: Language, Perceptuo-Cognitive, Personal-Social, Gross Motor and Fine Motor. The diagnostic testing determines a profile of each child's needs. Activities designed to meet these needs are planned and communicated to parents. The child's progress is implemented by support from three areas: individually assigned activities with the parent, activities with the Home Visitor and activities during Center visits. Parents are particularly encouraged to talk with their children, listen to their children, play with their children and take them on meaningful outings.

Bonnie Tyler, writing in Education (Winter, 1976) points out that the ability to play is not a universal skill among children. She states that cross-cultural observations of children reveal that the amount of fantasy and imaginative play varies from almost total absence in some cultures to complex, symbolic play in others. She further reports that curiosity and imaginative play occur less frequently in disadvantaged lower-class families.

In situations where parents must struggle to meet the daily necessities, it is understandable that there is little time to take much interest in children, let alone play with them. Lead Teachers and Home Visitors seek to encourage parents to provide a relaxed atmosphere for the child and to utilize normal daily routines to take advantage of "teachable moments." Centers are so organized as to encourage free play, and imaginative, creative play is stimulated by the presence of puppets, dress-up clothes, art supplies, etc.

During the current year, the Research Specialist is attempting to measure program results by the use of three tests. The Cooperative Preschool Inventory has been administered to a random sample of three and four year olds. The TOBE General Concepts Test was administered to four year olds. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test was given to all three and four year old children at each Center.

Table 2 shows the number of children tested with the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, the mean chronological age for each of the three groups tested, the mean mental age for these groups, and the difference between mean

chronological and mean mental age.

Table 2
Peabody Picture Vocabulary Tests

Groups	N	Chronological Age (CA) Converted to Months of Age		Mental Age (MA) Converted to Months of Age		Difference in Months of Age (CA - MA)
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
3 year old	157	41.3	3.6	30.2	6.5	11.1
4 year old, first year	119	53.7	3.5	35.5	7.9	18.2
4 year old, second year	98	53.4	3.5	40.3	9.2	13.1

The fact that the three year old children have more than an eleven month difference between chronological age and mental age and the four year old an eighteen month gap justifies the need for an early childhood program. With comprehensive data on parent involvement and participation, the Research Specialist hopes to be able to distinguish significant variables in the success of children in our program. A longitudinal study of these children is our ultimate goal.

In the program's brochure, we urge, Come On, Parents, Participate. This invitation is based on the premise that an intensive, directed program, which involves a high ratio of adults to children, which lasts a long time, which includes alterations in educational and family institutions, and which is founded upon the principles of mutuality, initiative, pleasure, etc. in actions conducive to growth must be significantly positive in its influence. Parents as well as children are the beneficiaries. Results will be long lasting, because parents as well as teachers are vital to successful education of children.

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